

## those words we dare not say by richiegayzier

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**Summary:**

Mike Wheeler sees his first soul mark when he's 6 years old. He knows what it is thanks to 10 year old Nancy's dreamy-eyed talk of soulmates and true love. He knows that anything particularly memorable to your soulmate for one reason or another, like a name or a date or a certain phrase, perhaps, becomes tattooed onto your skin. He knows that his Aunt Em allegedly has a paragraph from a Stephen King novel etched across her left foot. He does not know what this first word means.

OR

The soulmate AU where words/phrases/dates etc of importance to

your soulmate become permenantly imprinted onto your skin.

## those words we dare not say

### Author's Note:

that's right, i finally wrote a fucking byeler fic! v  
sorry that it didn't come sooner, and v v v sorry that  
its gonna be shitty. but, anyway, angst ensues!

(BTW SHOUT OUT TO SEADRIPPINGS FOR BEING  
THE REASON IM UPLOADING TO AO3)

### I

Mike Wheeler is just 6 years old when he first sees it. *FAG*, marked across his inner elbow in small, black font. He knows what it is thanks to 10 year old Nancy's dreamy-eyed talk of *soulmates* and *true love*. He knows that anything particularly memorable to your soulmate for one reason or another, like a name or a date or a certain phrase, perhaps, becomes tattooed onto your skin. He knows that his Aunt Em allegedly has a paragraph from a Stephen King novel etched across her left foot.

He does not know what this first word means.

He wants to ask his mom, to proudly show how grown up he is to already have a special word. But something about the three letters puts a sick feeling in his stomach. Maybe it's their stark contrast against his pale, freckled skin, or perhaps the harsh sound they make in his head, cold and grown up and frightening. Or maybe it is the sudden, taunting feeling of adulthood, how a piece of his innocence seemingly slipped away the moment he read it. Whatever the reason, it fills him with a sort of uneasiness that causes him to think telling her would be a bad idea. So instead, he does what any confused 1st grade boy would do. He goes to Nancy.

"Go away, Mike." She groans as he knocks on her door, the sudden noise making her pink marker slip across the page she was writing on in surprise. Again, he knocks, this time entering the bedroom before she has another chance to yell at him. Quietly, he moves over to her bed and places her rainbow of felt tips on the floor handful by careful handful. Another time he might've swiped them messily aside, but not now. Mike sits cross-legged at the foot, and any snarky remark

she might've had disappears. She can tell from his blank expression that he's completely serious.

Without a word (though maybe the contrast of the fearful, embarrassed, confused look in his eyes to his otherwise expressionless face is enough), he pulls up the sleeve of his pyjama top, and in his six year old mind he hopes to whatever God is listening that it will have disappeared.

His prayer is ignored.

For a moment, Nancy's face flickers in almost slow motion from shock, to awe, then back to shock, though perhaps a better word might be disgust, or pain, or something completely different. It's a sort of emotion a girl like her wouldn't have been able to define. Maybe it's fear for him, a fear that she didn't quite understand and yet is there, prominent and crippling. But whatever it is, two things are for certain; it hurts, and it sticks.

She slaps a hand over her mouth as she gasps, the other pulling Mike's arm closer, rubbing her thumb gently over the letters to see if they'll smudge. She looks up at him, and this time she feels somethings so simple; she feels her 10 year old heart breaking at the sight of her little brother, tears welled up in the corners of his eyes that she knows he doesn't know why they're there, a look of fear and utter lostness gracing his freckled features. "Whuh-wha-what does it m-mean, Nance?" He shakes out, lip trembling unsteadily. She wants to shrivel up and hide from that look, or maybe lock it up in a box somewhere no one, especially he, will ever find it.

"It..." Her voice cracks and she trails off, unsure. He's 6. She knows he'll hear it elsewhere eventually, of course she does. She isn't *stupid*. And yet, she doesn't want to be the one to put that maturity on him and strip away innocent parts of his childhood, the urge to hide it from him as long as possible right there. "It- Fag is a name some nasty people call people who're gay." The words spit quickly from her mouth, and she watches as his face dawns in realization. He's seen the way his mother turn the TV off quickly if it mentions 'the gays' when his father is in the room, his tight-lipped expression any time she isn't fast enough. He remembers the look of disgust on his face and how he'd practically shook in anger the time they'd seen two

men - Tom Rogers and Nigel Parks, who'd disappeared just days after Mr Parks and his dad had a "man talk" - holding hands coming out of a restaurant. His eyebrows furrow as he's silent for a moment, thoughtful. "Am I a f-fag?"

"No. No, you are *not* a fag. Okay, you might be gay, Mike." Nancy's voice lowers at the last word, and she tightly grabs his considerably smaller hands in her own. "But don't ever let anyone call you a fag or a fairy or anything else, okay? There's nothing wrong with liking boys. People might think it bad, or disgusting, or sinful, but it's not. You're still Mike."

By now she's hiccuping on her words, tears threatening to spill, though if he notices he neglects to mention. "Sh-should I tell m-mom?"

Nancy Wheeler, 10 years old and aged so many years in the past 5 minutes, sighs in almost relief. Finally, they've reached the simplest part of the conversation. "Yeah, I think you should. Come back when you're done, okay? I'll help you cover it up, if you want, yeah?"

Nodding, Mike slips down from the bed and goes towards the door. "And Mike?"

He turns to face her, and she flashes a weak smile. "Don't tell dad, alright? Promise me."

"I promise, Nance." The smile he returns is too big and red for his face, too wrong. It's no longer the smile of her nerdy baby brother, but the broken one of a scared little boy thrown all too soon into deep, murky waters.

Watching him walk away, Nancy's suddenly terrified that he'll never again be as he once was.

## II

When Mike is 9 years old, Dustin Henderson moves to Hawkins. He joins their 4th grade class midway through November, and by Mike's 10th birthday in late December, the two are best friends along with Lucas Sinclair and Will Byers. In the time passed since his 'first' word (which, after going to his mom, he discovered wasn't after all; his back already was littered with dozens more, mostly repeated slurs of 'faggot' and 'queer', and had been for months), 20 or so more have

appeared along his arm. He only shows a few, less revealing ones when in school, but they're still all there, harsh and unforgiving.

The day of his birthday sleepover, the first sleepover between the 4 of them, he forgets.

It's a Saturday, and way too hot to be wearing a sweater, despite it being winter, so he spends the morning down in the basement, wondering why 1pm won't just *hurry* up. It arrives eventually, of course, and Lucas gets there first. They've not been best friends as long as Mike and Will, but their moms are, and through many evenings at the others house and a few sleepy late night conversations, he knows that Mike covers some of his words in school (he's never thought to question what exactly they say, though). So when he notices the freckled boys arms are a bit more littered than usual, he doesn't say a thing. Instead, he goes downstairs to see the Dungeons & Dragons game his older sister bought him. 5 minutes later, and Lonnie Byers pulls up with Will and Dustin, shouting a drunken goodbye before driving away at speeds dangerous for a sober man. Will is clearly uncomfortable, and Karen makes sure to take him home herself in the morning. Again, they don't mention Mike's sudden abundance of soul-words (truth be told, they don't even *notice*), all 4 quickly enthralled in excited chatter over the new D&D board. In fact, it isn't until nearly 12 hours later, when they finally start settling down into their sleeping bags (*not* to sleep, of course. They're adamant that they'll pull an all nighter), that Dustin cries out in astonishment.

"Oh my god! Mike! You're arm!" He whisper shouts, pointing in surprise at Mike's arm. All of a sudden, the world seems to draw to a halt, and said boy remembers that every single word on his skin is uncovered. He feels naked and exposed under Dustin's gaze, his mind completely abandoning ship. Luckily, Lucas slaps Dustin's hand away. "He covers some of them in school, duh. Would you around with your arm looking like *that*? No offense, Mike." The curly haired boy shrugs, before turning his attention back to Mike. "What do they say?"

This, unfortunately, seems to interest Lucas. He's never once openly questioned what the boy was hiding (he's wondered in his head, of course. He feels like he'd be a bad friend not to), but now that someone else feels the same way, he's never wanted a question

answered more.

"Yeah Mike," he says, as Mike desperately tries to shrink into himself "what do they say?"

This time it's Will, mostly silent through this whole ordeal, who jumps to Mike's defence. "Guys. Cut it out." He says, his quiet voice a warning. *Go ahead*, it seems to coo to them, *ask him again. Go on. Push. Bet you wanna, sure you do. Push him. See who's gonna stop ya. Not me, surely not, not little Will.* The thought of Will saying it is absurd; never in a million years would he ever act that way. But the voice edges them on in their heads, daring them, completely unsettling, so they stay quiet. The silence that follows is more than half awkward, and everyone's relieved when Dustin farts, setting them off into hysterics. Nobody mentions Mike's marks again.

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It's 3am when Lucas and Dustin eventually pass out, the bigger boy flooped haphazardly across the sofa whilst the other snores softly, incoherent murmurs every now and again ("War stories." His mom told him once. "You're talking about your daddy's war stories." He never remembers). Mike himself is quite ready to sleep, his eyes heavy and head fuzzy. But he can see Will's eyes open wide and alert, even in the pitch darkness. He tries to sleep, knowing - hoping - that Will'll drop off any minute now. He speaks anyway, something inside of him insisting that he must.

"They're slurs." He whispers so as to not wake the other two boys. Part of him hopes he doesn't hear.

Will turns himself to the side so he's fully facing Mike and sits up slightly. Somehow he manages to lock eyes with him. "What?"

Mike stutters. "My muh-marks that I h-hide. They're g-g-g-gay slurs." He wonders why in the hell he thought this was a good idea at 3am, in total darkness, to the one person who didn't even want to know, and yet it feels like a huge weight has been lifted from his chest as he says it. Like for the first time in 3 years, he can breathe again.

"That's okay." He thinks he hears a smile in Will's voice, though it's too dark to tell (it crosses his mind that it had also been too dark to see his eyes. He tries not to think about that).

"You know that means I'm a q-q-q-" the word trips and rolls about his mouth, and his face begins to go red with effort.

"Mike," Will cuts him off, shuffling forward in their already close quarters, till he's practically sitting in his lap (he doesn't exactly hate it. Mike tries not to think about that either) "I know. It's *okay*."

Mike doesn't think it's completely okay, doesn't think he ever will. But he looks into Will's eyes (even this close, he probably shouldn't be able to see the deep brown of them, and he definitely shouldn't want to lose himself in them), and there's something there that makes him believe that he's right, that it is okay.

There's something in them that makes him feel safe.

They sit there for awhile, Will's head on Mike's shoulder, Mike's head racing with questions, the silence that blankets them comfortable.

"D'you got any?" He whispers. Will nods, but there's hesitance in the movement. "You don't gotta tell me, y'know, right?" He can practically feel the relief wash over the smaller boy, and he smiles.

"Thanks." His voice is only a squeak, but Mike can sense the gratitude in his tone. They sit awhile longer (maybe it's 10 minutes, maybe it's an hour, neither can tell), until Will nestles down and falls asleep. Mike looks down, smiling softly, and lies down too.

His stomach is full of butterflies, and his skin is covered in goosebumps despite the hot blush that is spread across his face. He tries not to think about it.

#### IIV

He's 12 when everything finally - *finally* - starts falling into place.

He may not be good at rationally expressing his emotions (he is, after all, a 7th grade nerd), but he knows that Will is probably, most likely, almost certainly his soulmate. He knows that Lonnie Byers was an absolute dick of a father, and that the harsh bruises Will'd been sporting more frequently in the few months before his dad's first departure weren't from falling down the stairs (for starters, the Byers lived in a *bungalow*), or brotherly wrestling matches with Jonathan, or any of the other bullshit excuses he'd made. He also knows that Joyce herself had taken a harsh beating the night she'd eventually kicked the drunken man out for the first (but not last) time; Lonnie, still drunk and even more disorderly, had almost kicked the Wheeler's door in just before he drove out of town, yelling slurred words down to the basement where Mike and Will had their sleeping bags set up. "Tell your *bitch* of a mother that, that she deserved all of



it, you f-f-*fucking* queer!" His shouts, drenched in alcohol, had been loud and terrifying. "Rot, rot in hell, the lot of y-you! See what the fuck I care!" Ted had eventually managed to make him leave with the threat of calling the cops, and moments later the sound of tyres spinning on tarmac echoed through the street. Downstairs, Mike had faintly heard his mom telling Nancy and Barb to go back to bed, but he'd been too busy hugging Will's shaking body to notice her stood on the basement steps.

He knows all of this, and he's so, so sure it's Will (He's never coming back is scrawled around his left ankle, for God sake).

But then Will disappears, and they find Eleven, and suddenly the puzzle pieces don't fit.

He likes El - *like* likes her. She's pretty, and a total badass, and he feels something towards her that he's never felt towards another girl before. He'd been positive he was gay, the fact that he'd only ever feelings for Will. But he likes El, he's sure of it. Still, doubts flow through his mind. Maybe he only thinks he likes her because she's the key to getting Will back, or maybe it's her buzzed scalp and boyish appearance (he doesn't dwell on the latter for too long however, feeling as though it disrespects and mocks her past). When he kisses her, however, he's sure of one thing; he *does* like her, and he thinks he could maybe one day love her. The gay slurs are still on his skin (El only has *011*, though somehow he knows from the beginning that it's a legitimate tattoo).

And then, of course, she disappears.

A strange wave of déjà vu washes over him, the screaming after El dissipates before their very eyes, the shaking as Lucas and Dustin drag him out with silent tears streaming down their cheeks, the sobbing when his mom hugs his fragile form and gently rocks him. In the hospital waiting room he mourns in silence, wondering what would've happened if he'd just *grabbed her arm...*

When he hugs Will, sparks shoot through his skin, his stomach turning to butterflies, and god fucking *damn* is he relieved that Will's alive, he doesn't know what he'd have done if he wasn't. But now he's too plagued with horrible thoughts to look at him any other way

than a friend. He pushes away any vulnerability he feels when Will gives him a soft look, and he starts to reconsider everything; he begins to think he's been piecing the puzzle together wrong all along.

#### IV

December 17th 1985 is the night of their 9th grade Winter Formal. They're together, all 6 of them (Max included), clad in matching baby blue. El's been back - *back* back, living with Hopper - for a year now. Will hasn't had a flashback for a little over 5 months, hasn't had a Doctor's Appointment in 11. Billy hasn't been around for God knows how long, and Max is the happiest she's ever been. Nancy and Steve (and Jonathan, but that's not something they talk about) are visiting from NYU. Everything is perfect as can be.

...and yet.

Mike doesn't want to say he feels nothing when he kisses El, or holds her hand, or looks down at her smiling face as they dance together. He *does* feel something, he knows he does. But whatever spark they once had is duller now. Things changed from 1983, and though he still loves her, in a way, he knows they can't work for much longer, and he's okay with that.

One thing that hasn't changed, however, and one thing he's not completely okay with, is Will.

Will, with his smooth skin and fluffy hair. Will, whose eyes he wants to get lost in and who's smile is the most goddamn beautiful thing Mike Wheeler has ever seen. Will, whose smile he would really like to kiss...

No, he's not okay with that.

He felt something with Eleven. It's not there anymore, but once upon a time it was, and it was real. So obviously, he likes girls. Simple. And then, when he looks to Will, it's not so simple. Because everything he once felt towards El, the butterflies, the happiness, the protectiveness, the almost-but-not-quite *love*, all of it (and so much more), it's all there with Will.

He really hates feelings.

It's December 17th, 1985, the night of their 9th grade Winter Formal. Mike dances with El close to his chest, trying to will the spark back. Every now and then, he looks over to where Lucas, Max, Dustin and Will are stood laughing, and his stomach does backflips seeing the younger boy looking so content. He hates himself for wishing it was him he was dancing with.

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Sometime over that Christmas break, Mike walks in on Nancy and Steve.

It isn't anything particularly R rated, just some making out, nothing he hasn't done with El. He knew it'd happen eventually, anyway. There's only so many places for them to be in a cramped house in the holidays. No, the surprising part is that Jonathan Byers is right there with them.

As soon as he drops his radio with a thud in shock, the three spring apart like a pair (trio) of deer caught in headlights, and when Nancy opens her mouth to speak, Mike just runs. He doesn't exactly know why his eyes sting with tears, or why he heads straight for the backdoor, but before he can reach his bike he bends over and throws up right there on the grass. The smell is putrid, and he goes on retching long after his stomach is empty. In fact, he only stops when a hand starts to gently rub his back. "Hey bud, c'mon, you're okay Mike, calm down, breathe." It's Steve. There's a little panic in his tone, and Mike tries to tell him that he is calm, and he's breathing quite fine, thank you very much, but when he goes to speak he notices the tears streaming down his face and the laboured wheezing of his lungs, and he thinks that maybe Steve's panic is warranted. Eventually, he manages to get his breathing working normally, so he slides down against the house, exhausted. The older boy sits too. For awhile, they sit in silence, the only sound being their breathing and Last Christmas playing a few doors down.

"Well," Steve begins, uncertain "we definitely never thought that would be your reaction. Props for originality, I guess."

Mike feels sick to the stomach, though this not in a literal sense. "Don't take it the wrong way. I don't disapprove or anything." He keeps his eyes shut, cold December air nipping at his cheeks.

Beside him, there's a quiet chuckle. "Really. I think the spew on the floor says otherwise."

"That's not-" his voice cracks, and he can feel the smile drop from Steve's face. "That's not w-why. I understand the three of you being in love." He doesn't second guess his word choice for a second. He's seen the way Nancy looks at Steve, and he knows his sister well enough to know that she wouldn't share that with someone she only *liked*. "But... it's just, seeing you and Jonathan, two guys, together, and then with a *girl*... it, I dunno, it made me face some things I've been tryna ignore, and I got scared." His eyes are open by now, so he can see the older boy nod his head.

"Talk to me, then." He all but whispers, voice gentle. "I'm no Nancy, but I think I've proven pretty good at these sorta things in the past. Plus, it wasn't too long ago that I was just as confused and terrified as you are."

Mike sits silently, hesitant to speak in case he says too much or Steve calls him crazy. He's so caught up in his thoughts, in fact, that he doesn't notice when he begins to empty out the entirety of his soul. He tells about going to Nancy with that 'first' word. He tells about his confession to Will, how he'd felt so much better afterwards. He tells about how he'd been so sure Will was his soulmate until he met Eleven. Every thought and feeling that's plagued him for the past 10 years, he tells about. And Steve sits, listening intently, his eyes brightening or his lips twitching upwards every now and again. When Mike finishes rambling (and when he's eventually caught his breath), he nods. "Yup, you're bi."

Mike stutters. "B-b-bi?"

"Uhuh," another nod from Steve "bisexual. I mean, I can't tell you who you are and who you aren't, obviously, but from what you've told me I'm pretty sure you're bi."

Mike's head spins. He barely manages to catch anything Steve says, the pounding of his heart deafening. "What does b-b-bi m-mean?" He questions. Something tells him he's almost there, though where that is or how he knows is a mystery.

"Bi is when you like girls *and* guys." Steve says it so simply, as if it were perfectly natural, and despite everything he's been told, despite the threatening looks his father gives gay people, despite the clear and obnoxious separation between 'the sinners' and everyone else. Despite all of this, Mike finds it makes perfect sense. He opens and closes his mouth, trying to speak, and ends up bursting into tears.

Steve, visibly panicked, puts an arm round the younger boy, but he's smiling so damn wide as he sobs. Because finally, after 9 years of pain and confusion, he's finally found himself.

## V

Will Byers heads off to UCLA on September 1st, 1989. His acceptance to the college had been celebrated by everyone (Joyce had cried more than a little), and the day had been eagerly awaited.

Now, the day before, Mike Wheeler is lay in his bed, in the dark, not keen on moving.

He hasn't been as close with Will over the past years, mainly due to pushing him away, and whilst of course he'd been thrilled for him getting into UCLA, he had been avoiding him for awhile now. For reasons he still tries to ignore.

\*knock\* "Go *away*, Nancy!" He yells, groaning and rolling towards the wall as light from the hallway floods the room.

"I'm not Nancy."

It's Jonathan, and for a minute Mike panics; the two aren't as close as he is with Steve, so if Jon was here to talk when Mike clearly didn't want to then either Nancy or Will was in trouble and if they're in trouble that meant they were probably in danger and danger could easily mean death and *Nancy or Will could be dead*.

"-ike! Are you there?" Mike looks up, abandoning his rambling thoughts, and sees a worried Jonathan. "IsNancyorWilldead?" He shoots out quickly.

The older boy shakes his head. "What? No, they're not dead." He smiles, and Mike instantly relaxes. "I'm asking why you're not going to see Will?"

Once again, panic, though this time the feeling is more repressed, and at the same time more nerve-wracking. "I-I..." he stutters pathetically. Jonathan's hard stare isn't helping. "I cuh-can't s-se-see him. Because then the f-f-fact that I'm g-gonna be away f-f-from him f-for a year is ruh-real."

"So?" His sister's boyfriend shrugs. "You're not gonna see Dustin or Lucas or anyone else for a year. So what? What's the difference?"

And that throws Mike off, because he knows what's different about Will, of *course* he does, Jonathan probably knows too. But the thought of actually saying it aloud, the prospect of setting those words free, is rather quite a terrifying one.

*"Will's different. I luh-l-luh-" Nice to meet you, Mike! I'm Will Byers!*  
*"luh-luh-" Mike. I know. It's okay. "luh-luh-" The roll. It was a seven.*  
*The demogorgon. It got me. "luh-luh-luh-" Yeah, crazy together. "luh-"*  
*I'm not leaving you, Mike. None of us are. You're gonna be okay. "luh-*  
*luh-" This is Trevor. My boyfriend. "GODDAMMIT I LOVE HIM!"*

For a while the only sound is Mike's ragged breathing as he tries desperately not to cry. *I love him.* At some point, Jonathan stands to leave. At the door, he stops.

*"They broke up, you know. Trevor and Will. So don't you break my brother's heart again."*

The now shaking boy doesn't, can't look up, but he can still see the sadness on his face. Eventually, Jonathan goes. Mike is alone once again in the unforgiving darkness.

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Hawkins at night is rather pretty. That's what Michael Wheeler thinks as he drives along Mirkwood at 11pm. He's been out at this time and later a bunch, of course, but he's never been in a good enough frame of mind to notice.

Now, his mind is the last place he wants to be.

In there it's a mess of fires and alarm bells and destruction as he goes over every possible scenario: Will will take him, he'll tell him to fuck off, he won't have broken up with Trevor after all, he won't be alone, he won't even be there. The last thought worries him the most, because it's been almost 6 years since Will disappeared and none of them need to deal with any of *that* shit ever again. He knows, deep down, that it's irrational. It's been 6 *years* since Will disappeared, after all.

The place he's heading to is one the 6 of them discovered sometime in the Summer of '86, a little clearing surrounded by trees and overlooking the lights of the town. It'd felt special, somehow, and was easy to get to by car, so it had become *Theirs*. Mike knows that, if Will was going to be anywhere, this was it.

Still, relief washes over him when he sees the battered '78 Fairmont

peering down over Hawkins, and Will's pale figure perched on the bonnet.

The small boy turns round in confusion at the sound of gravel crunching, ready to apologise to an office and speedily drive away, but he smiles lazily when he sees Mike. Not breaking the silence, the two sit together; not side by side, but close enough so that their feet knock every now and again and so, hands on the car and keeping them upright, their pinkies can just barely brush.

"It's beautiful at this time," Will sighs, still looking onwards "you can't see the ugliness in the dark." Mike knows what he means; the homophobia and the racism and the bullying, the constant pressure to do better, to be something other than yourself, something that conforms to society's idea of perfect. But he also knows that there's ugliness only Will and El and the many children, some alive and some dead but all forgotten, could ever fully understand, the ugliness that once upon a time ago tried to seep through; an ugliness that almost destroyed Will; and ugliness with enough power to kill them all. He isn't sure which he's talking about (he's not sure it matters), and the quiet continues.

Eventually, Will turns to face him. He looks as though he's been crying. "Why are you here, Mike?" He says, tired.

Mike doesn't know how to answer; he knows exactly why, but he's scared he'll frighten Will away for good. "For you." They're the only words he can say. He knows they can't be enough.

Will smiles a little - it doesn't look right. Broken, almost. "And I've been here 8 years. 8 years of waiting, of getting my heart broken. Do you know," his voice breaks, and a few tears spill down his cheeks "how much it hurt when I got back from that *place* and found you with your heart set on El?" Mike hates knowing the pain on his face is his fault. "Why now, Mike? Just when everything starts to look up, why do this now?"

And he's too scared to admit that he was scared and confused and young, because it doesn't feel like a good excuse at all, more like a piss poor attempt of one. Maybe Will's right, maybe he should just let it go, move on. Not all soulmates are destined to be lovers, after all.

But Mike remembers Jonathan telling him not to break Will's heart again, and he knows: walking away will do exactly that. He won't let

Will suffer any more because of him.

“I’m here now because I’ve grown. I’ve changed. I’ve learned. I fucked up so bad, but I promise you I’ve grown. Truth is, Will, I kinda always knew I had feelings for you. I read the signs, hell I *prayed* to those signs like the holy bible and I was ready to admit it. That night you disappeared I was ready to confess. But then everything happened and I was sure I liked El, I know I did, and 12 year old me figured you could only like girls or guys.” A crude chuckle escapes Mike’s mouth. His tongue is sandpaper, his throat a long, dry tube of words waiting to be said. Words that terrify him. “It only clicked at 15 that I could like both. I’ve not got any excuse for these past 3 years, I know. I was just... scared. Of hurting El. Of losing you.” He looks up from his spot of dirt to Will’s face. Tears are running silently down his face, chapped lips parted in wonder, conflict brewing behind his chocolate brown eyes.

“I won’t fucking lose you, Will.”

And suddenly they're kissing. It's tender, and far from perfect, but it's passionate. Their lips, slowly moving together in harmony, radiate nothing but longing and passion and love, so much love. Mike can barely breathe, for more reasons than one. Both boys feel galaxies a million years away spark to life. Their hearts beat frantically and yet in unison. Neither want it to end. Both know that eventually it must. Pulling away, Mike sees a fond sparkle in Will's eyes; he sees small droplets of sweat on his forehead that for the first time in years aren't the product of fear; he sees a blush of colour radiating from his skin that disappeared at 12 and never really came back. He sees bliss contentedness.

Not perfect, no, but simply knowing that *he* could make Will feel so utterly happy is good enough for Mike.

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It's 2am when the boys know it's time to leave. And they both know that if they don't speak now, they may never get another chance.

“Do you remember the first time we met?” Mike’s voice is a surprise to the both of them. “It was my first day of kindergarten. I was so scared, so fucking alone, and there you were, on that swingset everyone loved so much, alone too. I asked you to be my friend. And



you said yes.”

“You’ve told me this before, I think.” Will intervenes. “Best thing you’ve ever done.” He laughs lightly, but Mike’s face is so serious.

“I meant it when I said it at 13 and I mean it when I say it now. That was the best. Thing. I. Have ever. Fucking. Done.” His voice is genuine, and Will melts a little. The silence resumes itself for some time longer.

“You must love making my life harder, Wheeler.” Will eventually prods in a teasing manner head lay on the taller boy’s shoulder.

“I swear it’s not intentional.” Mike says. “You don’t exactly make *mine* any *easier*.” The two chuckle before falling comfortably into silence.

After a while, a sigh escapes Will. “Y’know I can’t give up UCLA for you Mike. I don’t wanna throw any chance of their being an us but I’ve worked too hard for this and-”

Mike grabs his hand in an effort to calm and reassure him. “*Will*. I’m not asking you to give up your dream. I’m not so selfish. And I’m not expecting you to even give me a chance, because I don’t deserve it. But no matter what,” he gently rubs his thumb over Will’s palm, looking him in the eyes, their faces but a kissing distance apart “I’m not gonna leave you, ever. I’d wait forever and a day for you. *I will*. I’ll wait here for you, because I love you so fucking much. Even when your off married and have forgotten all about me, I’m gonna live you, Will Byers.”

Will smiles. “I fucking love you too, nerd.”

And that’s when Mike’s heart explodes. He stops in silence, too joyful to speak, a smile slowly working itself across his face. “HEAR THAT, WORLD?” He screams, jumping up, his words full of happiness as they float down to the town below. “WILL BYERS LOVES ME! *WILL FUCKING BYERS LOVES ME!*” Will laughs beside him, tugging on his arm and telling him to shut up. Birds evacuate their trees at the sudden noise, hundreds of pairs of wings flapping overhead. Eventually, Mike does quiet down, but the huge, lovestruck grin is still plastered across his face. “You fucking love me.” He whispers almost carefully, like the very words could shatter at any moment.

“Yeah,” Will leans his head on Mike’s shoulder, smiling. “I do”

Somewhere down in the twinkling lights of Hawkins, a song plays

loud enough so that the notes travel up to them. It's Cherish by The Association, and Will hums softly along. Mike traces the appearing set of words on the smaller boy's arm, his heart lurching into his throat, and for the first time in such a long time everything feels okay. It feels like home.

*Will fucking Byers loves me.*